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WHITMAN AND MIŁOSZ'S AMERICA

Abstract: This paper investigates the ambiguous process of Czesław Miłosz's integration into America (both its nature and culture) in the context of his literary commitments and "private obligations" to American poetry. It was a long and painful process, a constant struggle with the state of exile, feelings of homelessness and uprootedness that finally showed the poet the "new identity" of the modern man, bound to recognise his unstable, tenuous position in space and time. According to Miłosz, America was a testing ground for all mankind, and the very core of American literature had always been the question: "Who am I?" Thus, Miłosz's serious involvement in American history and culture gave him a new perspective on global civilisation; it helped him to recreate his own identity and to strike a balance between homelessness and belonging.

Key words: exile, the lyrical "I" and the "I" of dithyramb, finding a home in homelessness

America and Exile

When Miłosz was departing for America, which was to become his new place of residence, Tomasz Merton wrote: "I am sure you are on the threshold of a new development that is very important, and I am equally sure that it is better for you to be here than in France right now, though it may not be apparent just why (Merton, Miłosz 1997: 96). By 1960 Miłosz had been working in the diplomatic service in New York and Washington for five years and had been an emigrant for ten. This time he expected a great confrontation, and not only in the personal sense; as a writer endowed with particular insight into history he was to confront a society he deemed thoroughly "*anti-Heraclitean*." Ten years earlier he had simply fled from America, fearing an aimless life and intellectual listlessness. Back then, he

had found nothing there to dedicate himself to. Now, he sought to establish a clear goal, to anchor himself in the society, without exposing the wealth inside him to impoverishment. Merton understood him well, as he himself incessantly sought a balance between contemplation and devotion.

> Total deracination, uprootedness, is contrary to our nature, and the human plant once plucked from the ground tries to sink roots into the ground onto which it was thrown. This happens because we are physical beings; that is, we occupy space, and the space we occupy, bounded by the surface of our skin, cannot be located in a "nowhere" (Miłosz 1983: 203–204).

Miłosz's letters to Merton provide us with a clue to his complex situation. On the one hand, America is a place where neither the Slavic accent, nor ethnic habits exclude you from the community. On the contrary, they help in rendering you "normal," as you become one of many in a crowd of newcomers. On the other hand, for a man of letters, the circumstances of exile are predominantly of a linguistic nature. "What started as a private, intimate affair with the language," says Josif Brodski, "in exile becomes fate – even before it becomes an obsession or a duty" (1990: 108). In other words, only in exile does one notice the dependence of language and imagination upon the community of understanding. "I cannot stand writing in a foreign language; I am incapable of it," complained Miłosz (1985: 7) as late as 1977. This was not because of a simple inability to speak English. The problem stemmed from the fact that a thought addressed to a foreign reader is rooted "somewhere else," determined by a different society, different language experiences, inexpressible, as each language has its own way of developing. However, there may come a time when a private struggle with language enters another dimension, acquiring a universal significance. Then a path opens to deeper regions of civilisation, to the very mechanisms conditioning consciousness and human communication. Only from such a perspective, incorporating the various phases of history and various regions of the globe, can a dialogue between cultures become a dialogue between equal voices. "Isn't the same tongue," asks Miłosz, "just an illusion where uncountable individual languages fill space with a jamming noise?" (2001a: 18).

One can say that, all in all, Miłosz laboured hard to acquaint himself with America from scratch, because he was not only preoccupied with the present state of American civilisation, but also with its contemporary lineage, going back to the Enlightenment. He would not have managed this

if he had not been turning into an American himself. The reasons why he remained a Polish poet in spite of this are fundamental but also enigmatic. It was not about the activity of writing; one can write texts in a foreign language and – as Joseph Conrad proved – write excellent novels. With poetry, as understood by Miłosz, the matter is very different. Possibly the longing for an understanding beyond all borders stemming from inter-cultural differences is directed at a kind of mythical community. The protagonist of *The Issa Valley*, little Tomasz, in fact hungers for "a sort of impossible communion with living creatures" (1981b: 176). This is a shard of the paradise myth, a longing for the prelapsarian world. If, however, as Northrop Frye maintained, the primeval and most crucial function of poetry consists in constantly recreating the mythical potential of imagination, then such a longing at least deserves our respect. Actually, it may only be located in the language of childhood. Because the poetic imagination feeds on inexpressible verbal matter and its oldest stratum is naive, it dates back to a period when words somehow emerged from things:

> And the word revealed out of darkness was: *pear*.
> I hovered around it hopping or trying my wings.
> But whenever I was just about to drink its sweetness, it withdrew.
> So I tried Anjou – then a garden's corner,
> Scaling white paint of wooden shutters,
> A dogwood bush and rusting of departed people.
> So I tried Comice – then right away fields
> Beyond this (not another) palisade, a brook, countryside.
> So I tried Jargonelle, Bosc, and Bergamot.
> No good. Between me and pear, equipages, countries.
> And so I have to live, with this spell on me.
>
> (Miłosz 2001b: 183)

Tempting Whitman

The above quotation comes from Miłosz's first American poem; its title is significant: "Po ziemi naszej" (Throughout Our Land). Both English and French translators have used the plural form ("Throughout Our Lands," "A travers nos terres"), effacing the element of transgression – the gesture of encompassing different areas of the earth, which remains an affirmation of the brotherhood of man. One of Walt Whitman's later poems, "Unnamed

Lands," tells of the different strata of existence hidden in what is visible. "Not a mark, not a record remains – and yet all remains," says Whitman (Whitman 1959: 263), poet of ecstatic gibberish and childish astonishment, wanderer, the bard of America, the admirer of urban crowds from which there emerge the innumerable shapes of perfect men and women.

Miłosz's poem opens with a quotation from "Children of Adam" which is, at the same time, an allusion to his first reading of Whitman in the antebellum translations by Napieralski and Tom:

> When I pass'd through a populous city
> (as Walt Whitman says in Alfred Tom's translation)
> (Miłosz 2001b: 183)

The populous city – New Orleans or (in Miłosz) San Francisco – is primarily a modernist image of a flowing element, Whitman's *en masse*. "If I am *en masse*," writes Miłosz in *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, "I do not set out to define myself in terms of my knight's castle, peasant's hut, or bourgeois store, I am an Everyman and I must define myself in a universal fluidity, in a human collective in motion, composed of Everymen" (Miłosz 1983: 207). This is less about merging oneself with the masses than about relating oneself to other particular people who have been thrown into a geographically dubious position. *En masse* may denote finding a home in homelessness, a phenomenon which is specifically contemporary and specifically American. It is contemporary in that the transfers of capital and the growth of large cities encouraged the migration of people and the literary legend of *cité infernale,* as well as a Baudelairean fascination for the accidental. It is American because America, as observed by Miłosz, is a country of exile which "became almost a paradigm of all exile" (Miłosz 1983: 208). It is here, according to the poet, that the images of the disinherited space, views of dumps, hovels and neon deserts appeared before anywhere else.[1] In other words, homelessness is at the root of the American civilisation: the memory of roaming tribes, the struggle of colonists, the persistence and determination of castaways. And maybe it is this thrusting of human particles into the boundless space of the continent which fascinates Miłosz most: "They are so persistent, that give them a few stones / and edible roots, and they will build the world" (Miłosz 2001b: 184).

[1] Similar observations can be found, for instance, in Ewa Hoffman, for whom the theme of alienation has a "particularly American flavour" and can be encountered in American literature more often than anywhere else. Cf. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (Hoffman 1990: 182).

However, if Whitman patronizes one's initiation into America, he does so because his poetry is a quest for completeness and internal freedom. Whitman says "I" and establishes his body as the centre of the universe, but at the same time, he opens himself to voices, absorbs contrasts and embraces the body of earth. In doing so, he brings down the barriers between the "I" of poetry and the "I" of dithyramb. By establishing himself as the centre of perception, he participates in what is shared and counteracts the subjective "narrowing" of poetry. Even before the war, Miłosz wrote a poem entitled "Dytyramb,"[2] which is, in a way, a Whitman poem. Seeking a counterweight to "pure poetry" and the individualism sealed inside, Miłosz turned to the "poetry of joy," poetry which succumbs to the rhythm of the surrounding world and which, at the same time, manifests internal freedom:

> Radość bez miary. Wolności nam trzeba,
> wolności trzeba, aby się nie troszczyć
> o to, jak to ma być opowiedziane, co naszych ust na swoją spowiedź chce.
>
> Boundless Joy. Freedom is what we need,
> Freedom is needed, so we don't need to take care of
> how it is to be told, what wants our lips for its confession.
> (trans. M.Ch.)

In the poem "Vocalism," Whitman talks about the divine power of the utterance, a gift of the wisdom of ages and generations, an accumulation of gathered experience: of madness and prudence, of friendship and hate, of despair and hope. All this, and the limitless multitude of existing things, becomes the heritage of the poet, if only he is capable of modulating the organ of his voice and finding a space that befits the reality in him. "All waits for the right voices," says Whitman (Whitman 1959: 271), the whole world awaits to be removed from silence. Miłosz writes in "Slow River":

> (…) The invisible rein on every living thing / leads to your hand – pull, and they all / turn a half-circle (Miłosz 2001b: 18).

[2] Miłosz wrote two poems entitled "Dytyramb." One was written in 1965 at Berkley and was included in the volume *Gucio Zaczarowany* (Bobo's Metamorphosis). This poem was translated into English by Peter Dale and Czesław Miłosz and can be found in the *New and Collected Poems (1931–2001)* collection (2001b: 209). The other, written before World War II, has never been translated into English (cf. Kosińska 2009). In the present article, all quotations from Miłosz's texts which have not been translated into English appear in Michał Choiński's translation.

In terms of *Trzy zimy* (Three Winters), we ought to stipulate that here it is less a case of Whitman's influence, as the Romantic tradition seems more significant, especially Mickiewicz and Goethe. It is worth mentioning, however, the basic differences between the American poet and his European counterparts. Born at the same time as Norwid and Baudelaire, Whitman was deeply democratic and his cry of *Camerado!*, his faith in friendship and brotherhood, are almost plebeian in nature. This did not prevent him from feeling like a seer and a prophet – after all, did he not call himself a "historian of future" (Whitman 1959: 7), one who exalts the eternal and what is to come? And it could be precisely this conjunction – unthinkable in Europe! – that renders Whitman the patron saint of anarchists, a fact which made Miłosz consider Allen Ginsberg an heir to his tradition. However, when Miłosz himself struggled with the stigma of Romantic aloofness and the heritage of the "cursed poets" who shunned the dirt of life, Whitman came to his aid.

Miłosz began translating Whitman during his first stay in America. He worked on two poems: the sixth fragment of "Song of Myself" (omitted in Napieralski's translation) and "Dirge for Two Veterans." But in 1950, in "Three Choruses from *Hiroshima,* an Unwritten Drama,"[3] the poet included a fragment which encapsulates his fascination with Whitman:

Ileż to razy, w tłumie wielkich miast
Szedłem, wzywany ciepłą mocą krwi, pragnieniem,
Aby zebrać i zamknąć losy wszystkich ludzi
W sobie na zawsze. Mężczyzną i kobietą,
Dzieckiem i starcem być chciałem równocześnie.
Wołaniem moim wzmocnić głos moich braci i sióstr,
Każdy uśmiech i każde milczenie ogarnąć
I wejść w płomienne centrum, którym ludzkość żyje

How many times, in the crowd of great cities
have I walked, summoned by the warm power of blood, by the desire
to collect and enclose the fates of all people
inside of me forever. A man and a woman,
a child and an old man, I wanted to be them all at the same time.
To reinforce the calls of my brothers and sisters with my own call,
to seize every smile and all the silence and
to enter the flaming centre, where mankind dwells;
(trans. M. C.)

[3] This poem has never been translated into English (cf. Kosińska 2009).

The temptation in Whitman consists in the desire to multiply personalities, to open oneself to the existence of others – this need is almost physical, sensual, but also erotic. It is worth noticing that here Eros is childish and mature. He is childish in "Sparkles from the Wheel," which Miłosz included in *Nieobjęta ziemia* (Unattainable Earth). To melt away in the moment of beholding, the poet joins gazing children: "Myself effusing and fluid, a phantom curiously floating, now here absorb'd and arrested" (Whitman 1959: 275). Or he is grown up in "Children of Adam", where from the "populous city" in his memory only one woman remains, with freckled skin and a passionate embrace. Miłosz writes in *Visions from San Francisco Bay*:

It is impossible not to mention the name of Walt Whitman here, but not because Walt Whitman is America. The truth contained in the ecstatic stammering "to be alive among the living" exists separate and apart from him, and even before I had read Whitman, his sense of things compelled me to search for words and was the source of all curiosities and passions (Miłosz 1983: 64).

Wherever you are, you could never be an alien

It is no accident that America reconciled Miłosz with himself and with his world, even if this concealed a great sense of resignation. When, on the threshold of world fame in 1975, he wrote his *Noty o wygnaniu* (Notes on Exile), he was no longer a castaway. Certainly not in the way which determined his situation in France, where he could either be a Frenchman or a foreigner, and where he was entitled to refugee status. He already knew that a poet in exile "may win, but not before he agrees to lose" (Miłosz 2001: 16). *Zgoda na przegraną*, becoming reconciled to the dissolution of the project of one's own world, is a tragic experience. More interestingly, Miłosz accuses Americans of lacking a tragic sense "which is only born of historical experience" (Miłosz 1981a: 263). This is the *Heraclitean* element, the recognition of the fragility and fluidity of life which crystallises in the instability of form. And it is from such a recognition that a sense of dimension is born, one which is unlike the dimension of humans who take their world and their civilisation for granted. Whitman was not a tragic poet; such a label would be more fitting for Baudelaire, with his loathing for nature and admiration for human theatre. In Whitman there is, however,

an infatuation with the excess of existence, a consideration of the human being from the perspective of stars, which less annihilates than strengthens human existence: "I was thinking this globe, says Whitman (in a fragment translated by Miłosz),

> enough till there sprang out so noiseless around me myriads of other globes.
> Now while the great thoughts of space and eternity fill me I will measure myself by them,
> And now touch'd with the lives of other globes arrived as far along as those of the earth,
> Or waiting to arrive, or pass'd on farther than those of the earth,
> I henceforth no more ignore them than I ignore my own life,
> Or the lives of the earth arrived as far as mine, or waiting to arrive.
> (Whitman 1959: 315)

Miłosz absorbs America simultaneously on different levels; his firm and lasting discord with this world makes it impossible for him to integrate fully with the intellectual environment; at the same time, his imagination was already embracing the space with a "telescopic eye":

> Wherever you are, colors of the sky envelop you
> Just as here, shrill oranges and violets,
> The smell of a leaf pulped in your fingers accompanies you
> Even in your dream, birds are named
> In the language of the place, a *towhee* came to the kitchen,
> Scatter some bread on the lawn, *juncos* have arrived.
> Wherever you are, you touch the bark of trees
> Testing its roughness different yet familiar.
> Grateful for a rising and a setting sun
> Wherever you are, you could never be an alien.
> (Miłosz 2001b: 186)

And thus I return to a poem in which the spaces of Lithuania and America intermingle, and in which reconciliation to *this* place, and not any other, means finding a home in homelessness. This, however, is assumed to be the condition of the modern man, disinherited from the space whose hierarchy was set by the "throne of God." I have already mentioned "Unnamed Lands"; it ought to be said that the above quotation from Miłosz is, in a sense, an extension of Whitman's motif, because "unnamed lands" belong to the dead, who live in us and in every place they were corpo-

rally bound with: "Not a mark, not a record remains – and yet all remains" (Whitman 1959: 263). The earth is full of voices which await the poet's words.

Trans. Michał Choiński

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